way we get by by brawlite

Series: lattes and love songs [3]
Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)
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Summary:

Billy isn't exactly sure what to do when Steve has a panic attack while they're baking together. Their friendship is still fragile, still rocky -- he doesn't want to make a misstep and ruin everything. But, the least Billy can do is not leave Steve alone though, right?

way we get by

Author's Note:

- For ToAStranger.

  written for toastranger -- i hope this brightens your day, at least a little bit.

  please turn on **spoon's** *way we get by* for the full mood experience of this thing.

It happens quickly.

One moment, they're baking in the back of the coffee shop, bopping about to Steve's terrible hipster music -- the next, Steve is skittering backward, body tense as he drops to his knees. The bowl he's holding, metal and full of carefully sifted flour, falls with a clatter that breaks through the upbeat tempo of the music. Clouds of powder-white plume into the air and drift slowly to the ground, all while Steve heaves in shaky breaths and fists his fingers, white knuckled, on his knees.

Or maybe it happens slowly, after all.

Steve has been a little off all day. A little quiet, a little more standoffish than normal. He hadn't wanted to talk about it, when Billy had asked him if he was fine. Which was -- fine. They're friends -- they're sometimes *more* than friends -- but they're not *that* close, Billy tells himself. They don't always *talk* about things. Steve doesn't owe him that. Doesn't owe Billy his rich, vibrant words. So, when Steve doesn't want to talk, Billy lets it go. He lets go of Steve's distraction, his anxious movements, his frenetic and unhinged energy. He lets go of Steve's precarious silences and writes the whole thing off as a bad day. Insomnia, maybe -- that happens, more often than not.

He lets go, but does not leave. Billy's worried, so he stays and lingers, camping out at the coffee shop all day, through the afternoon and the evening. He sticks around until Steve locks the door, wipes down the

counters, and asks Billy for his help in the kitchen making pastries for the next day. Billy does what he can. He helps, but doesn't push. Because that's not who they are, and he knows this facet of reality like the back of his hand.

It's fine. Or, well, it *would* be fine if Steve wasn't currently kind of the opposite of *fine*.

The bowl is still spinning, rattling on flour-covered tile when Billy falls to his knees in front of Steve. His hands reach out before he can stop himself, hovering in the empty air between the two of them, frozen; he's suddenly not sure if he should touch.

Steve's breaths heave uneasy between the beats of the music, uneven and tight and painful. Billy watches him for a moment, with wide eyes, careful and panicked all at once. Steve is shaking, so minimally that it's barely noticeable. Like something coiled and vibrating with electric current -- a live wire. He's wound tight, muscles tense, like he's trying to curl in on himself, like the world is too much and he's trying to shut it out.

Billy drags his fingertips through the flour on the ground before he pushes himself up with his palms. On stumbling feet, he takes long strides to the stereo in the corner of the room and -- for lack of time or finesse -- just unplugs the thing straight from the wall.

Everything is plunged, suddenly and mercilessly, into cold silence.

The lyrics of the last song echo in Billy's ears, jumping straight back to the beginning and continuing on without the beat -- *we get high in back seats of cars, we put faith in our concerns, fall in love to down on the street, we believe in the sum of ourselves* -- he knows the song too well. He doesn't know the name, or the artist, but it's on one of Steve's coffee shop playlists, filtering in through the speakers and into Billy's head before he even realizes he's heard it enough times to get all the lyrics down. Enough for them to stick around and rattle around in his thoughts, even cut off from the source.

Steve's too-fast breathing is even louder now. Maybe it's just because Billy cut the music.

Hopefully.

He sinks down to his knees in front of Steve again, jeans disturbing the layer of white that is circling Steve like freshly fallen snow.

“Hey,” Billy says, voice quieter than usual.

He watches the way Steve’s jaw clenches at the sudden sound. The way his muscles tighten. He doesn’t look up at Billy, just grips his fists tighter -- his nails must be digging into his palms -- and stares, unseeing, unblinking, at the ground.

Billy doesn’t have too much experience with panic attacks, all things considered. It’s not that he *doesn’t* panic or doesn’t understand it -- but he deals with the feeling tremendously differently than Steve does. Billy would be outside right now, burning through a pack of cigarettes, and then another -- maybe pacing, or maybe standing stock-still, ignoring the world around him in favor of focusing on the need for nicotine. On a simple, stupid task. When Billy panics, he likes being left alone.

He’s not sure if he’s supposed to leave Steve alone.

The uncertainty burns like acid in the back of his throat, bitter and cruel. The uselessness, the concern, they eat him up inside. He wants to *fix it*. To make it right. The desire is vicious and overpowering, loud and hissing in the back of his head. But this is new. This is foreign and unfamiliar.

Billy doesn’t even know if he’s welcome here in this moment. Doesn’t know if Steve and he are even that close.

But, by god, Billy’s here now, and he’s going to try.

Billy steels himself, taking any waver out of his movements, and leans forward to run his hands over Steve’s upper arms. Gentle, but deliberate. Comforting. “Hey,” he says, soft and cottony. “You’re alright.”

He’s not expecting Steve to crumble, to fall forward into Billy the second he’s touched. He’s also not expecting sounds too eerily similar to sobs to escape from Steve’s throat, unbidden and broken. It breaks

Billy's heart.

Immediately, Billy wraps his arms around Steve, pulling him close to his chest before he can disintegrate even further. "*Hey, hey, hey*," Billy says, lips brushing against Steve's too-soft hair. He smells like Billy's shampoo, like coffee, like brown sugar. "It's alright. I've got you," he says, running a flat palm up and down Steve's spine, feeling the knots of it under his hand.

It's brutal, watching Steve like this, *feeling* him like this. He's trembling, shivering in Billy's arms, breathing heavy and hard and wet against the fabric of Billy's shirt.

Steve's shoulders loosen ever so slightly under Billy's touch -- so Billy keeps touching him. Just runs his palm down the lines and planes of Steve's back, gentle and soothing. Just a reminder that Billy is here, that Steve isn't alone.

He doesn't know what's wrong, what Steve's panicking about -- if anything -- but he talks anyway. Keeps up a running little commentary, even though he's not all that great with words. "It's okay. It's fine. You're fine." He presses his lips once more to the top of Steve's head. "Everything's okay, I promise. I'm here."

Maybe, in some universe, Steve cares about Billy being here, *wants* him here for something like this. Maybe, in some minute way, it'll bleed through and mean something that Billy is next to him in the here and now. It's all he can hope for, instead of just feeling useless and wrongfooted.

Billy tries to press back on the concern that something is *truly wrong*, that Steve won't snap out of this. He knows a panic attack when he sees one, even though he doesn't get them himself, and he can only assume that he's correct in his assumption.

"I'm here," Billy repeats, when Steve whimpers into his chest, hands fisted viciously in the fabric of Billy's shirt. "I'm here, babe. It's alright. I've got you." He repeats that last bit, over and over, pressing the occasional kiss to Steve's ridiculous, amazing hair.

I've got you, I've got you, I've got you.

Until Steve yields.

Though perhaps *yield* is the wrong word. Steve uncurls ever so slightly -- and then presses himself forward, forward, forward -- *forcefully*, against Billy. He practically climbs into Billy's lap as he does it. The problem is, Billy's still kneeling in front of Steve, precarious and unbalanced, on rapidly bruising knees. When the full force of Steve hits him -- hard, like Steve's trying to climb into Billy's skin to escape the panic -- Billy falls backward, ass first onto the dusted, tiled ground. He takes Steve with him, strong arms wrapping around that trembling body, unwilling to let go.

They end up in a tangle of limbs until Billy rearranges them, pulling Steve directly into his lap. It's a little awkward -- Steve's not all that much smaller than him, when it comes down to it, but Billy makes do. He curls his whole body around Steve, as best as he can, murmuring soft little things into his hair, into his ear, his jaw -- anywhere Billy's lips can reach.

Steve's nose finds his neck. Each breath he takes in is shaky and hot against sensitive skin. Painful, in a second-hand kind of way. Billy wants to help more, but he can't. He can't crawl inside Steve's skin and push the panic out. All he can do is try to sooth it over with careful hands.

But, as rough as it is, Steve's breathing is better than it was five minutes ago. His body, tucked into Billy's protective warmth, is trembling less, too.

So: it's easing. Billy's helping, even if the progress is slow.

Or maybe it's just the natural progression of things. Billy knows that you can't panic for forever. Eventually, you've gotta come down.

Well, the least Billy can do is be here until Steve does just that. Until he settles.

Steve's long legs are draped over Billy's lap, spilling uselessly over and onto the ground beside them. It looks uncomfortable, but maybe isn't, considering Steve's shifted a couple times but has left his legs where they are.

Eventually, though, Billy's the one whose back begins to complain about their choice of positions. A cold tile floor isn't ideal for sitting in general, and it's *really* not ideal for sitting with the weight of an extra person in your lap. That, and maybe Billy's getting a little old. His body isn't nearly as forgiving as it used to be.

Carefully, Billy scoops Steve up, one arm under his arms, one under his legs. Steve makes a disgruntled and confused noise as Billy stands, Steve tucked into his arms like a blushing bride.

Billy carries Steve to the couch, the cozy patchwork thing Billy napped on when he was feverish and sick. The same couch that sparked a myriad of weirdness between Steve and him, months ago. Things are still weird now, he knows -- just in new and different ways.

Billy doesn't hate the couch so much anymore, now that he's had more than a few heated, messy moments with Steve on that tattered piece of furniture. The good memories outnumber the bad.

Instead of just setting Steve down on the couch and following suit, Billy sits first, Steve still in his arms. He doesn't make any moves to detangle Steve from his limbs or to get Steve to release his death-grip on Billy's shirt, so Steve stays. It's easier that way. And maybe Billy kind of likes the way Steve clings to him, disliking the thought of trying to pry those fingers free from soft cotton.

It's better, now. Billy can lean back and keep his arms around Steve and still be comfortable. He can cradle Steve until he stops shaking, until Steve's muscles loosen. Billy feels it happen, bit by bit, Steve relaxing against him.

"You doing a bit better?" Billy asks, nosing at Steve's neck. Billy presses his lips to Steve's pulse point just to feel the reassuring beat of Steve's heart against his skin. He doesn't ask if Steve is *okay*, or *alright* -- he knows the answer to both of those and he's not sure he's ready to hear a lie.

Jerkily, Steve nods. "Yeah," he says, his voice barely a whisper.

His fingers are still white-knuckled at the front of Billy's shirt, flour

covered and tense.

Time slips by, lost in the moments between Steve's erratic breathing and Billy's jaw-clenching concern. It passes, and Steve loosens. Billy frets, just a little bit less.

"I'm sorry," Steve finally says, as Billy traces idle patterns over his back, his shoulders, his ribs. "God, I'm sorry." His voice is rough and broken and Billy *hates it*. He hates that Steve is sorry, hates that he sounds broken because of it -- Steve has *nothing* to be sorry for. Absolutely nothing.

"Hey. *Shh*. Don't be," Billy says, catching Steve's eyes after a moment. He draws his thumb over Steve's cheek, following the lines of his face. His pupils are blown, but he looks like him again. Not a weird facsimile made of panic and anxiety. "It's fine, I promise," Billy assures him.

"I just --" Steve starts, and then goes a wide-eyed, a little lost. "Just --"

"You don't have to tell me anything," Billy says, after Steve trails off, voice lost inside his mouth, between his thoughts. "You don't have to talk about it. I mean, we can talk if you *want*. If that'd help. We can always talk later, too." God, he wishes he as good with words like Steve -- but he's not. He's left fumbling and awkward, but Steve nods anyway.

"Later," Steve says, looking relieved. "Later," he repeats. Like a promise. Like absolvement. He rests his head back down on Billy's shoulder and just breathes.

Humming a little, Billy cards his fingers through Steve's hair and stares at the seams on his shirt, tracing the rhythm of the pattern with his eyes. There's something calming about the monotony of it, the here, then there, of the thread.

What feels like an hour later, after it all started, and Steve's no longer trembling. His fingers are loose and relaxed against Billy's skin, softly resting where they lie. When Billy focuses on it, he can feel Steve's fingertips trace tiny patterns between his freckles, his moles. Billy

loves it. Loves the space between it all.

“You turned the music off,” Steve says, after a little while.

The room is quiet around them, stark and strange.

“I did,” Billy says. He doesn’t want to get up to turn it back on. He doesn’t think Steve would appreciate that either, with the way he’s still clinging to Billy. “You know, I think I know all the words to that last song, though, if you want me to sing it.” He’s kidding. Kind of. Billy would hang the moon for Steve, if only he’d ask.

“Okay,” Steve says, the beginnings of a smile starting to creep onto his face. Something teasing, something casually affectionate. “So, sing it.”

And god, Billy knows better. He does. Billy Hargrove doesn’t do this shit; he doesn’t bother with sentiment or softness. He doesn’t know what to do with emotions that raw, that fragile -- they’re not for people like him.

Billy knows he’s in too deep when he considers it anyway. He knows the words. Knows the way he feels when ‘*and that’s the way we get by, the way we get by’* starts repeating in his head, because it reminds him of Steve. Because, in the end, everything reminds him of Steve.

Billy should laugh. He should pry himself off the couch and away from Steve’s heat and careful hands. He should plug the stereo back in to kill the silence in the room.

Instead, he presses his lips to Steve’s hair one last time and starts singing.

Author's Note:

you can find me on tumblr, if you are so inclined.